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“Amputee Considered to be Over-Abled”

According to many disabilities studies scholars and activists, the complex concept of disability, is defined by social, cultural and historical aspects of society. Different people have varying attitudes toward the concept of disability and also adapt existing opinions and beliefs. People who are “able-bodied” frequently view disability as a biological restraint, something that physically impedes a person or their lifestyle. The medical definition of disability deals with what someone is lacking or what they are not capable of doing. In Simi Linton’s article, “Reassigning Meaning,” she argues that society should reassign a new definition to the term “disability,” because it is often used inappropriately and in a demeaning fashion. In her article, she states, “The disability community has attempted to wrest control of the language from the previous owners, and reassign meaning to the terminology used to describe disability and disabled people” (Linton 223). Disability is not exactly something that must be classified medically; it is defined as an attitude that comes from one’s background and the way people with disabilities are viewed in general. For example, someone who has been exposed to someone who is missing a limb may not have the same reaction to and assign the same meaning to that disability, as would someone who has frequently come into contact with people of this type of disability. Disability can also be expressed through visual representations, and it is these representations that impact our perception. An image of Oscar Pistorius thoroughly illustrates this point. For example, in today’s culture, sports are extremely popular and play a central role in society’s social aspect. Athletes are idealized and portrayed in truly iconic fashions. However, Pistorius does not exactly fit into this iconic vision of how an athlete should be portrayed. His character is inconsistent with society’s predetermined notions.

Oscar Pistorius, also known as the “fastest man on no legs,” was born without fibula in both legs and was the first amputee runner to compete in the Olympics. After both legs were amputated at a young age, he has utilized j-shaped prosthetic legs made of carbon fiber, known as “cheetahs.” With the aid of his prosthetic legs, he holds several world records including the one hundred, two hundred and four hundred meter sprints. Since he was a boy he has played rugby, water polo and tennis. But now he focuses more on track due to certain knee injuries. Recently, he has petitioned to participate in the next Olympic games, but because of the fact the he is considered more “able-bodied” than most people who are not amputees, he was unfortunately deemed ineligible to run in the Olympics. \*

The intended audience is the general public, as the article was published in the *New York Times*, but the photo also makes an appeal to athletes and people who are involved with sporting events. The audience’s perception is that Oscar Pistorius is in fact comfortable with himself and the fact that he has prosthetic legs. Being that his composure in the photo delineates confidence and pride, the audience senses this and creates an opinion, or judges Pistorius. This judgment is essentially what disability is characterized by. Astonishingly, Pistorius is viewed to be more able-bodied than most humans with all of their limbs. Oscar Pistorius is considered to be more able-bodied because his prosthetics have proved to give him an unfair advantage. Unfortunately, Pistorius was barred from competing in the next set of Olympic games because of his paradoxical “over-ability.” This also defies the common misconception about disability. The audience’s perception of someone who is disabled can frequently entail emotions such as pity, or even disgust. But, in Pistorius’ case, he detaches himself from what Simi Linton refers to in her article as a “marginalized status”(page 225); the public may even ironically envy him. The fact that he has a new ability that transcends the human body’s limitations, it is possible that he may evoke envy in others. This is only one example of how an audience’s attitude in general is based upon their reaction, which in turn, defines disability.

When viewing this photo in the article “An amputee Sprinter: Is He Disabled or Too Abled” in *The New York Times* by Jere Longman, that is debating whether Pistorius is too able, one’s reactions could be very different than if this photo was represented differently. Everything depends on what the venue is attempting to achieve. The audience ultimately determines how the image is interpreted. The *New York Times* portrays him as an individual that is very strong, but if Pistorius was represented as deficient or incapacitated, his life could be portrayed incorrectly, when it is actually rich with accomplishments. Depending on how the photo is depicted plays a key role in determining the public’s attitude towards Pistorius’ disability and other disabilities in general. Perception is very malleable. If the immediate context is changed dramatically, the way someone or something is viewed can fluctuate.

However, the way in which Pistorius is viewed is highly complicated. By others, he is considered to be more able than most human beings. His over-ability challenges the concreteness of disability. His unique situation defies the binary between disabled and able. He can be categorized in neither the disabled category nor the able category because he is disabled, according to the medical definition, and socially, he is considered “over-able.” This is exactly how Linton has the grounds to suggest a redefinition of the term disability.

As Linton argues, one definition of disability is far from medical. A disability can be characterized by a multitude of factors including social and cultural aspects of society. The way an audience views a person, can ultimately define their disability. But, the fact that someone is physically different from “able-bodied” people does not necessarily mean they are “disabled.” As presented, in the case of Oscar Pistorius, his physical appearance and general well being do not correlate directly to him being “disabled.” One’s feelings towards someone who is disabled, which can range from empathy to pity, to disgust, can partially define someone’s disability, but that person’s background and mindset also contribute to the definition of what is medically categorized as their “disability.” Also, disabled people are often portrayed as suffering or decrepit individuals, which is frequently not the case. As Linton states in her article “Reassigning Meaning,” “although some people may experience their disability this way, these terms are not used as descriptors of a verified experience but are projected onto disability” (232). Many disabled individuals lead fulfilling, successful and minimally impeded lives. These are the factors that will define disability, and strip the term of its medical denotation. The situation of Oscar Pistorius shows exactly why one cannot place someone in an exact medical category of disability because the binary between the two categories is not as clear as one might think. The concept of disability therefore must be defined through social and cultural means.

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